
“Basketball Diplomacy in Africa: An Oral History from SEED Project to the Basketball Africa League (BAL)”

An Information & Knowledge Exchange project funded by SOAS University of London. *Under the direction of Dr J Simon Rofe, Reader in Diplomatic and International Studies, Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy, SOAS University of London* jsimon.rofe@soas.ac.uk

Transcript: Chris Dial
Founder & CEO, The Basketball Embassy
Former Men’s U16 National Team Coach (Kosovo)

Conducted by Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff
Research Associate, Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy,
SOAS University of London Lk16@soas.ac.uk



Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Could you please state your name, age, and how you first become involved with basketball?

Chris Dial

Chris Dial, newly 41, player, coach and lover of basketball. The arrival would be difficult to pinpoint... the departure will coincide with my time on earth running out.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How did you first become involved with basketball in Africa, and what about the sport's African growth and development drives your work in the field?

Chris Dial

I worked with delegations from 17 African countries in 2010's Children of the World Camp in Istanbul, Turkey; again, with another 12 or so delegations in 2014 at Camp Pass It On in Istanbul; and most recently with a delegation from Tunisia in a reciprocal exchange program funded by the U.S. Department of State's Sports Diplomacy Division. I am also in conversations with several groups and organizations, like Beyond Hoops Africa in Kenya about different endeavours and programmatic elements to facilitate the game and diplomacy through it.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

What inspires or drives you to help grow the game in Africa and what do you hope the end result(s) will be?

Chris Dial

Growing the game has been my life's work. I am driven by all it has given me and the gravity it has provided through life's adversities. There really is no end result for me... this mission does not have a finite timetable, but more so represents an endless quest to further develop humanity using the world's greatest sport as a vehicle or mechanism to do so.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How do you view the intersections of basketball and diplomacy as they relate to the African continent—and Tunisia, where The Basketball Embassy is presently involved, more specifically? How has your understanding of this nexus changed as a result of your work?

Chris Dial

I think Africa found and the world now recognizes what an incredible tool basketball has become to achieve shared results and accomplish goals. Basketball continues to dissolve barriers and raise a new generation of youth under a different premise than the generations that preceded

them – we can unite as people if we follow the rules and guidelines that sport, specifically basketball has provided us.

Tunisia is an interesting case study. It is a country with great human capital and people possessing the desire to enact that reality in the most significant ways. Tunisia has achieved great successes in the game, but is now seeking to advance their basketball community and culture to another level. They are currently exploring ways to do so and The Basketball Embassy is humbled and honoured to be partners in their path.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

From your perspective, in what ways does basketball diplomacy play into less tangible measurements of growth and development on the African continent?

Chris Dial

I think the less tangible/ intangible elements are the ones most pertinent and meaningful to assess. The game develops populations globally, not only in ways of awareness and sensitivity to our place in the world, but also in areas of self-respect, discipline, work ethic and opportunity. Basketball gives us the real-time arena to practice and develop skills to manage victory and defeat healthily and progressively, while understanding a balanced reciprocity in relationships that can drive success. Africa needs this in different ways, but in the same relative doses that the most developed communities on the planet do as well.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Who are the key stakeholders in developing or conducting basketball diplomacy in Africa, what do you think their impact is/has been, and how do they differ from who is actually developing or conducting basketball diplomacy in Africa (if at all)?

Chris Dial

Sports diplomacy often mirrors trends in the global political climate. As various nation stakeholders in the African Continent continue to impart their scope of interaction and influence, soft diplomacy measures will undoubtedly follow. That said, the most obvious entities that are having an impact on the continent are the trailblazers in talent identification and acquisition. While organizations like Basketball Without Borders and Athletes in Action have made their marks in certain significant ways, the NBA, Jr. NBA and their affiliates continue to mark their territory in the communities that have fallen and continue to fall in love with the game.

Europe was sooner, in the sooner or later of capitalizing on that love of the game. Mirroring the trends of colonialism, African influence on the game can be seen off the Continent as well, which is important to keep in mind in all of these discussions. The EuroLeague is decorated with

athletes hailing from the continent as is the NBA. To pinpoint development, it's pioneers and sustainability is difficult to do in an overarching way. To the country, it would be easier to see what is working and what isn't or hasn't. Like everywhere else in the world, local context is integral in establishing identity in sport, which should resemble cultural identity for effective development. TBE loves these challenges and relishes the opportunities, when presented, to be a part of that discovery and application.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How has changing ways of consuming basketball—and ways of learning about the game—impacted basketball in Africa? How can one still inspire kids to dream through the game?

Chris Dial

Inspiring kids is still relatively easy because the game is so inherently good. Consumption is now driven more by social media: snippets of the sport at the highest level all the way down to grassroots heroes of the game. From a back-yard crossover to a playground ally-ooop to Giannis dominating a 4th quarter on primetime television. Tunisia, like places everywhere, finds joy in celebrating its participation in the sport. The game has unintentionally, but beautifully, connected cultures that otherwise may have remained distant. There are kids connecting through the game from all walks of life within country and abroad. Dreaming results as a collective experience in basketball falls on all of its individual participants. It inspires me as I witness it.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

What are the challenges of basketball diplomacy in Africa—are they more unique than in other parts of the world—and what are the unique opportunities of basketball diplomacy in Africa? Particularly, in your view, why basketball and not football, rugby, or cricket?

Chris Dial

The challenges are many, but unique only in the local and specific context of where the challenges lie. Barriers to entry, resources and mindsets are often among the largest and most influential hurdles. In many ways though, we are dealing conceptually with what Locke wrote in reference to as a *tabula rasa*. Africa as a whole, presents somewhat of a blank slate in terms of development opportunities and growth of the game in a systematic and deliberate fashion. I believe football having preceded basketball in a lot of ways, has been through a certain amount of trial and error, but in doing so has approached its ceiling in terms of popularity and practice. Basketball however, remains to be the world's fastest growing sport and doesn't seem to be anywhere near its ceiling in terms of participants and scope of influence. Time is key and this is basketball's time.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

From your perspective, how does basketball play a role in creating identities in Africa based on who plays or consumes it, and why, and what role do the various diasporas play (particularly those in London, New York, and Paris) in this equation?

Chris Dial

Basketball can play a very specific and key role in developing identity, just as a place's identity should play a key role in the development of basketball. It knows no religious or political differentiators and although socio-economic variables play a role in barriers of entry, our game's participants represent the richest and poorest people on the planet. The diasporas play an incredible role because they incubate ambassadors to the game. They produce change-agents and architects of avenues of opportunity for those that weren't a part of the diaspora. They also become conductors of complimentary cultural integration and exchange. Perhaps most significantly, they represent in those cities, a unique brand of hope that tends to fuel development and growth on its own.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

In what ways does basketball in Africa afford (greater?) opportunities for women, and how does it work towards SDG 5 Gender Equality?

Chris Dial

I think it does everything for all groups underrepresented in areas of equity and opportunity. The game proceeds with no prejudice in its assimilation of all people and cultures. That said, it often takes a game like this and even its perceived successes or potential accomplishments to empower and enable a group (like women) to achieve at a level they had previous seen blocked or defended by society and history. Stubborn experiences can foster stagnation in areas of social change. As basketball conquers the African continent, we will surely see women not only receive some of its momentum but also propel it in a lot of different ways. Gender isn't an identifier or qualifier in basketball like it is in the world. Gender, like religion, politics, or origin is an afterthought on the court. It isn't a prerequisite or a determiner of what is usually an equitable share of joy and contentment from basketball's participants. It remains to be the perfect cloak, in my opinion, for the heroes of basketball diplomacy worldwide.

END

Written Interview with Chris Dial, March 2020

Founder & CEO, The Basketball Embassy

Conducted by Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Research Associate, Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy, SOAS University of London Lk16@soas.ac.uk

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10 Thornhaugh Street

Russell Square

London WC1H 0XG

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